

The quiet removal of the NMA's director

By John McDonald
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John McDonald looks at why Dawn Casey's contract has been extended by only 12 months.

To be inaugural director of the National Museum of Australia is an honour that should not be bestowed lightly. When the job went to Dawn Casey, an Aboriginal woman and career bureaucrat, there were predictable mutterings about the "politically correct" nature of the appointment.

It was felt that the Howard government, whose record on Aboriginal affairs has been widely criticised, had shrewdly chosen a director who would be able to defuse much of the controversy surrounding the museum.

In particular, there was the tricky problem of how to portray historical relations between black and white Australians in a way that did not succumb to ideological claptrap from the left or the right.

In a little over 18 months, Casey has proved herself worthy of the job. Since the NMA opened in March 2001 she has had to defend the institution against wave after wave of the most virulent criticisms some of them justified and well-argued, others merely spiteful or ideologically motivated. In every instance she has behaved with consummate dignity and tact. Although she was originally considered to have little "museological" experience, she has grown in the job and won the respect of her staff.

So when it was announced last week that Casey's three-year contract would be extended for no more than 12 months, a feeling of shock and dismay rippled throughout the arts community. Perhaps even more dismaying is the fact that no media outlet has bothered to pick up the story, with the exception of a few small items in *The Australian* and the *Canberra Times*.

The story in the *Canberra Times* of December 3, quotes "an insider" who assures us that the decision to dump her "has nothing to do with ideological differences on the NMA council or her views of Aboriginal history". It was more the belief that Ms Casey has done a good job setting up the museum but someone else might be needed to take it to the next stage."

This, to put it politely, is fertiliser of a bovine nature. It is hard to see the decision as anything but ideological and it has been enacted with cynical indifference with regard to the media or public opinion. To date, that cynicism has been justified by the resounding silence that has followed the announcement.

The government probably does believe that Casey "has done a good job", but it is now expedient to bump her off so "someone else" can institute the kind of policies and a version of Australian history that the Prime Minister and his colleagues find more

acceptable. This "someone else" has a deeply ominous ring, suggesting a candidate is in the wings.

More ominously still, it signals the government's belief that the time for pussy-footing with the arts and cultural institutions has expired.

Casey may never have expressed radical views on Aboriginal issues, but neither did she downplay their importance. The government and its advisers, however, seem to be preparing to take a more aggressive stance against the so-called "black armband" view of history.

Casey is not making any speculations. She has not protested against her dumping, but neither has she welcomed the prospect. She has let it be known that she does not even want to say "no comment".

Neither is it coincidental that Casey can be quietly assassinated at the same time that the government has ordered "a review into the funding and efficiency of national arts institutions", as reported in *The Australian* on December 5, and confirmed in parliament by Senator Richard Alston four days later.

The ideological assault will be justified by the logic of economic rationalism: arts institutions must be made to pay their own way even if that means a serious decline in quality of exhibits, starvation of necessary resources, and an inability to fund exhibitions and displays with little commercial potential that may nevertheless be of national, historical importance. In other words, get ready for a slow, painful process of dumbing-down.

Aside from these policy considerations, there is an element of sheer bloodmindedness in the decision to eliminate a discreet, well-performed public servant like Casey, who has been acting in exactly the way that high-profile public servants should act. In representing her institution she has not said anything inflammatory, has not stirred up trouble for the government or done anything to get on the front pages for all the wrong reasons.

If one looks elsewhere in Canberra, to Yarralumla for instance, where the hapless and almost invisible Peter Hollingsworth still holds office, or to the National Gallery of Australia, where the accident-prone Brian Kennedy has had his disastrous five-year term extended by another two years, one can only wonder whether this government is driven by stubbornness or by dark, masochistic urges.

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